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“My Palate Hung With Starlight” –  
A Gastrocritical Reading of Seamus Heaney’s Poetry

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**Abstract**

Nobel-prize winning poet Seamus Heaney is celebrated for his rich verses recalling his home in the Northern Irish countryside of County Derry. Yet while the imaginative links to nature in his poetry have already been critically explored, little attention has been paid so far to his rendering of local food and foodways. From ploughing, digging potatoes and butter-churning to picking blackberries, Heaney sketches not only the everyday activities of mid-20th century rural Ireland, but also the social dynamics of community and identity and the socio-natural symbiosis embedded in those practices. Larger questions of love, life and death also infiltrate the scenes, as they might in life, through hints of sectarian divisions and memories of famine.

This essay proposes a gastrocritical reading of Heaney’s poetry to study these topics in particularly meaningful ways. Gastrocriticism is a nascent critical approach to literature that applies the insights gained in Food Studies to literary writings, investigating the relationship of humans to each other and to nature as played out through the prism of food, or as Heaney wrote: “Things looming large and at the same time [...] pinned down in the smallest detail.”

**Keywords:** gastrocriticism, Seamus Heaney, food studies, Ireland, foodways, georgic poetry

The poetry of Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) deals intimately with the concrete material reality of life. It captures the land and the people of Ireland and especially rural County Derry (Northern Ireland) where he was born and raised. While often read from an ecocritical perspective (see Kerrigan; Lidström; Morgan), Heaney's focus is not just on nature as such, but includes anthropogenic landscapes, farming and other foodwork, as well as some instances of eating. In that, he follows poetic traditions such as English Romanticism, and also two later poets squarely rooted in the farming life, Robert Frost and Patrick Kavanagh, both of which Heaney cites as an influence (Ross; O'Driscoll).

This essay proposes a gastrocritical reading of Seamus Heaney, informed by research and insights in the field of Food Studies. Heaney's poetry distinguishes itself by an abundance of agricultural and culinary scenes, and, more importantly, by attention to detail and gastronomical accuracy. Therefore, a gastrocritical approach to his work is suitable, in order to delve deeper into the meanings of that aspect of his work. It is hoped that this essay contributes not only to an understanding of this acclaimed poet, but also of the foodways of (Northern) Ireland, which he vividly chronicled and brought alive in his work.

### Gastrocriticism

The critical paradigm for this essay is that of gastrocriticism. This is a nascent critical approach emerging from the field of Food Studies, and it can indeed be considered a branch of it (De Maeseneer), while being executed with the disciplinary methods of literary studies. Most work that has adopted the gastrocritical approach, whether explicitly or not, has been done since the turn of the millennium, although there have been some pioneering examples in the last century (for example, Upton; Schmidt; Tobin).

The name 'gastrocriticism' was coined by Ronald W. Tobin, an American professor of French and Italian literature in 2002, and

thereafter picked up by a small number of scholars of literature in various languages; mostly, however, not in English and not of the British or American literature canon (Rita De Maeseneer on Latin-American and Caribbean literature in Spanish; Anne H. Rønning on Australian travel writing; R. L. S. Tordoff on Ancient Greek drama; Anne Ajulu-Okungu on Tanzanian literature in English; Satarupa Sinha Roy on Italian literature; Rafael Climont-Espino on Latin-American writing in Spanish; Thomas Fahy on vampire movies; Binti Mariatul Kiptiyah on Indonesian literature). Maria Christou is an exception as she adopts this critical approach in her discussion of the philosophy of food in Margaret Atwood, Paul Auster, and Samuel Beckett.

Gastrocriticism, as Tobin defines it, is “a multidisciplinary approach that links gastronomy and literary criticism” (“Qu’est-ce que” 24, my translation), relying on “extensive research” (“Qu’est-ce que” 24, my translation) in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, medicine, semiotics, psychoanalysis and philosophy to explore food in all its aspects – what is now commonly called Food Studies. The interaction between this approach of literary criticism and the multidisciplinary field of Food Studies, both anchored in a concern with food and foodways in all facets, is a fundamental characteristic of gastrocriticism.

Even without the explicit adherence to gastrocriticism, there has been a growing interest in food and literature in the Anglophone world in the past two decades (Fitzpatrick), both from literary scholars and from food scholars. Indeed, as the field of Food Studies has itself developed from its beginnings in the 1990s, the increasing depth of understanding of food and foodways has arguably spread into affiliated disciplines, so that critical readings of food in literary and creative texts have grown more complex – more, as it were, gastrocritical. Amy Tigner and Alison Carruth provide a methodological description of their approach in the 2018 book *Literature and Food Studies*, in which they claim to

model an approach to literature and food that integrates the methods of cultural history, close reading, and archival research

with concepts drawn from both literary studies – such as narrative, rhetoric, form, audience, authorship, and taste – and food studies – such as foodways, food justice, gastronomy, and agrarianism [...] to tease out relationships between cultures of food and major literary forms: tragedy, utopianism, satire, modernist fiction, and so on (4).

This essay argues that while the work around food literature and food in literature has been diffuse as of yet, the approach of gastrocriticism is forming as a distinct critical paradigm. In brief, the gastrocritical approach to literature and imaginative writing applies a “culinary lens” (Tigner and Carruth 8) to texts. It investigates not only the symbolic and rhetorical use of food and foodways in texts, but also the meaning and context – social, historical, political or other – of their material or embodied appearance. It takes food and foodways seriously. From the area of food history, such contexts include, for example, the influence of cooking on the evolution of man and the Agricultural Revolution (Wrangham; Sinclair and Sinclair), the Columbian Exchange (Crosby), the history of trade, commodities and colonialism (Mintz; Bernstein), the history of famines and the food-related aspects of political upheaval (Woodham Smith; Belasco), the Industrial Revolution and the history of food-related science and technology (Diamond), as well as the history of cuisines, restaurants, and famous culinary personalities (Page and Kingsford; Mahon; Flandrin and Montanari; Scholliers; Spang; Symons; Mac Con Iomaire).

The areas of food anthropology and sociology draw attention to such concepts as the meal (Douglas; Visser), hospitality and commensality (Fischler “Commensality”; Kerner et al.), feasting and fasting (Bell; Bynum; Ellmann), edibility, omnivorousness and nourishment (Lévi-Strauss; Fischler “Food”), the Third Place (Oldenburg and Brissett), taste, habitus and cultural capital (Mennell; Elias; Bourdieu *Distinction*), patterns of preference and avoidance (Harris), authenticity, sustainability and ethical consumption, rituals around production and consumption, or the restaurant as a theatre (Goffman), to name but a few. Scholars of

the philosophy and politics around food add to the discussion with thoughts on the ethics of killing and eating, of aesthetics and art, of food justice and food systems (Korsmeyer; Nestle; Boisvert and Heldke). More broadly, again, are topics that are pivotal to all of Food Studies, such as the transformation of nature and raw materials into food through human labour and ingenuity.

### A Gastrocritical Reading of Seamus Heaney

Heaney's poetry is deeply and notably rooted in the social and geographical context of Northern Ireland, particularly rural County Derry, where he grew up. This is particularly evident in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, which abounds in rural settings and famously begins with a poem ("Digging") that measures the craft of the poet against that of his farmer ancestors. It was in the interest of this essay to investigate whether the original closeness to the farming life, as reflected in his early poetry, waned over time, as Heaney moved away from his hometown, even abroad, and worked in settings more distant to everyday rural realities. It therefore aims to look at the span of Heaney's work, from his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), to his last two, *District and Circle* (2006) and *The Human Chain* (2010), including seven out of twelve published collections – the other four were *North* (1975), *Field Work* (1979), *The Haw Lantern* (1987) and *Spirit Level* (1996).

Because of the large number of poems by this prolific writer thus available for consideration – 262 in all in those seven collections – a further choice was made to pay particular attention to poems where food and foodways played a central role, had an "active presence" (Buell 25), which applied to 27 poems out of all seven collections. This was determined after reading every poem in the seven collections and considering the appearance and role (if any) of food/foodways in each. An "active presence" of a non-human entity, as discussed for nature/the environment in nature writing both by Lawrence Buell and by Don Scheese in his 1994 position paper for the Association of the Study of Literature and the

Environment (ASLE), implies that this entity is not just a reflection of character or theme, but a protagonist in its own right, part of “a significant interaction” (Scheese in ASLE 11) and even able to influence action or character development.

A reading of Heaney’s work in the selected collections reveals a number of recurring gastronomical themes. The most prevalent themes are staple foods/cuisine, farming, rituals around food production and consumption, transformation through human labour as well as collective and individual identity, related particularly to identity-forming productive foodwork, and to identity-forming consumption. Other recurrent themes include seasonal cycles, hunting/fishing/foraging, commensality, material culture, the Third Place, husbandry/stewardship and – of not insignificant importance in the context of Irish history – the Famine, hunger and food security.

### Staple Foods/Cuisine

“The history of alimentation is the stuff of history itself,” writes Tobin (“From Lviv” 7), as the production, trade, preparation, preservation, and consumption of food have structured nations, economies, cities and societies. Gastroliterary scholars value food in literature and food writing as a conduit to past foodways. Representations of food in writing can, on the one hand, yield variegated information about habits, practices, and attitudes of the past. On the other hand, the depiction of food practices in a text can also serve to anchor the plot or characters in a certain time, place, or also class, gender, religion etc. Attention to the historical and geographic setting has therefore been a recurring theme and touchstone of gastrocritical readings.

Heaney’s poetic works capture the staple foods and cuisine of a place and time. The foodstuffs that populate his poetry are integral to (Northern) Irish foodways, and through their often homemade character also representative of their time (although there is evidence of modernisation, as “The Milk Factory” [*The Haw Lantern* 35] shows). We read about potatoes and wheat; milk

and butter; beef, pork and turkey; scones and sandwiches; tea, stout and whiskey; eels and oysters; blackberries, gooseberries, pears and crab apples; leeks, onions and turnip. Indeed, in many instances, we are privy to their production, procurement or processing: eel-fishing, potato-farming, butter-churning, beef trade and butchery, picking of blackberries and gooseberries and baking scones, as well as the ancient work of milling grain, going back to the neolithic quernstones found in the Céide Fields of North Mayo ("Belderg," *North* 10-11).

### Food Production/Procurement

Heaney captures images of food production much more than of food consumption. Growing out of the rural Derry of the 1960s, farming and related activities such as animal husbandry, natural and seasonal cycles, rituals of production and material culture abound. In "Mossbawn: The Seed Cutters" (*North*), Heaney is observing or remembering an agricultural scene and is inspired to set it into a wider intellectual-cultural context. Here, he is linking the scene to the Dutch painter Brueghel, who famously painted many genre paintings of country life in the early modern age. Indeed, Heaney addresses the painter directly, acknowledging that country life may not have changed so much since Brueghel's times – the workers seem to be "hundreds of years away" (xi), working according to age-old "calendar customs" (xi).

The specificity about agricultural work in "Cow in Calf" (*Death of a Naturalist*) is typical for Heaney – the slapping of the cow is a common activity in cattle herding, so is her look of having "swallowed a barrel" (25), and so are her returning "heats and calves" (25). However, the poet's achievement is to take us into the situation and then out of it by pointing to natural rhythms and cycles, and how they alter the usual position of power of the human. The natural (albeit culturally shaped) rhythms are beyond the individual, cow or human. This supernaturalness is shown through the "depth-charges/far in her gut" (25), as well as the udders containing "windbags/of bagpipes" (25). The interaction of



the speaker with the cow shows him to be nearly powerless – when he tries to steer her by “slapping her out of the byre” (25), there is resistance; not by the will of the cow but by her sheer volume, to the point that the slapper actually gets hurt. This can be read as an awareness of impotence against nature. Indeed, this may not be any particular cow, because she does not seem to be different from any other cow, ever. She is cowness. This is emphasised by the eternal rhythm described in the last two lines:

Her cud and her milk, her heats and her calves  
Keep coming and going. (25)

“Blackberry Picking” (*Death of a Naturalist*) also showcases the seasonal cycles and rituals of rural life:

Late August, given heavy rain and sun  
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen (8)

Again, the cycles of nature render humans powerless. The last lines of the poem lift it beyond the activity of blackberry picking to a wider concern: things rotting, spoiling and time passing, to our chagrin and yet, hope:

I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not. (8)

The material culture of farming life is central in “The Turnip-Snedder” (*District and Circle* 3-4). Said turnip-snedder (a slicing machine) is fully personified. It speaks, digs its heels in, wears greaves (shin-guards) and body armour, stands guard, has a barrel-chest, and wears a breast-plate. There is no human presence in this poem (except the “bare hands” [3] in the first line); the turnip-snedder speaks to an unspecified audience. Handles turn by themselves, and the snedder seems to do all the work by itself. Indeed, it likens its work to God’s work, from cradle to grave, “from seedling-braird [shoot] to snedder” (4). Yet it is humans who

have built the machine, and who turn the handle, which turns the cultivated, harvested plants into food, though arguably feed for farm animals if pre-sliced like that. This points to the crucial role of human labour in food production.

### Transformation through Human Labour

The Northern Irish cuisine, as portrayed by Heaney, may not be a highly elaborate one in the style of the French *haute cuisine* or similarly sophisticated culinary systems. Indeed, several poems make references to wild foods that are hunted, fished or foraged, such as eels, oysters or wild berries and crab-apples. Yet the vast majority of human foods are originally produced through human culture – cultivated – and then transformed through cultural activities from raw materials into foodstuffs (Rozin). We transform things into food, and, at the same time, transform the world around us.

Heaney's poetry shows a deep understanding of this fundamental principle, as several poems showcase the transformation of landscape into cultivated lands, or elemental foodstuffs into human foods. It is explicitly noted in "Belderg" (*North* 10-11), which commemorates the discovery of the possibly oldest field system in Europe, the Céide Fields. The neolithic fields overlooking the Atlantic in County Mayo are a transformation of the natural surroundings, "the first plough-marks" (10) on a landscape now patterned with stone walls. The first half of the poem is a note on agricultural production methods as well as domestic processing with quernstones (ancient milling implements). The poem asks us to consider then and now, the "persistence/A congruence of lives" (10) – the "stone-wall patternings" (10) of Ancient Mayo are "repeated before our eyes" (10) in the present day, as dry-wall enclosures have not fundamentally changed since then. Incidentally, quernstones were still used at least as late as the 19th century in Ireland (Rattigan and Mac Conmara).

Perhaps one of the most powerful instances of this transformational power is “Churning Day” (*Death of a Naturalist*). The poem accompanies the process of butter-making, from the souring of the cream in clay pots to the communal work of churning the cream into butter, “coagulated sunlight” (9). Yet it is not only the cream that is transformed – so is the family by the intense collective effort, a rhythmic, ritual labour that echoes dances and trances, bringing the cosmic (“sunlight”) into the local here and now, and resulting in transcendence and expanded consciousness:

And in the house we moved with gravid ease,  
 our brains turned crystals full of clean deal churns,  
 the plash and gurgle  
 of the sour-breathed milk,  
 the pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps. (10)

The joint labour that everyone participated or was involved in – if not directly then by the incessant sound and rhythm and pervasive smell – yields a great transformation in the churn. But the very rhythm of the work consists of a transformation in itself, in the same way that dancers dancing to a strong beat may have transformative ecstatic experiences, resulting in heightened consciousness. Not least, the “gold flecks” of butter also “dance” (9). Afterwards, everyone moves with “gravid ease” (10), as one might after an ecstatic, quasi-religious experience (see also Morgan 128-129). The churn, no less, was “purified” (9) before the experience. In the phrase “coagulated sunlight” (9), Heaney not only captures vividly the brightness and texture of the fresh butter, but it is actually also materially true, as sunlight passes through grass and milk and the “brewery of gland, cud [= grass] and udder” (9) into this nutritious food. However, it is human activity that is the key in the transformation.

A pervasive cultural motif such as the transformation through human labour can make a powerful statement through its inversion or absence. In “At a Potato Digging” (*Death of a Naturalist*), the seasonal work of harvesting is disinvested from its cultural

achievements by firstly not calling it harvest – the labourers are “fishing” the tubers from “the crumbled surf” (18), as if nature was providing them without human input (“Native/to the black hutch of clay” 18). Secondly, this “processional stooping” is not part of a human plan, but “recurs mindlessly as autumn” (18), as if it entirely belonged to a natural cycle. Potatoes are shown to be born from the earth as if without human intervention: “The rough bark of humus erupts/knots of potatoes (a clean birth)” (19). As further discussed below in the context of the Irish potato famine, the workers are further humbled by language that recalls animals rather than humans, underlining their powerlessness not only in the face of a natural disaster, but also as colonial subjects stripped of rights and agency during the 19th century.

### Collective and Individual Identity (1): Through Foodwork

The much-cited quotation of German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach “You are what you eat” (1) has become a cliché; however, there is considerable scholarship on the relationship between food consumption and identity, be that individual identity and personal choices (Pietrykowski; De Solier; Johnston and Baumann) or collective identity, for example in relation to national cuisines (Wilk; Appadurai).

But it is also important to consider the aspect of identity in relation to the production or processing of food. On the one hand, there is the occupational identity (Phelan and Kinsella) of food-related professions such as farming, butchery, bakery, fishing, professional cooking and serving (Trubek; Owings). Charles Christiansen explains that “when we build our identities through occupations, we provide ourselves with the contexts necessary for creating meaningful lives” (547).

On the other hand, there are the informal roles around the production, processing and preparation of food, whether it be the care work in the home, self-fulfilment through activities such as cooking, baking, fishing or growing a vegetable garden, but also

informal communal activities related to food, such as seasonal work (harvesting, foraging), events and rituals. Foodwork, whether professional or private, shapes our relationships and understanding of our place in society and the world. The links between food and identity are therefore a noteworthy aspect of gastrocritical readings of literature.

“Eelworks” (*Human Chain*) revolves around food and identity in several of its sections. The community’s identification with their foodwork is highlighted in the fifth section through their continued use of a different name for the fishery:

On the hoarding and the signposts  
 ‘Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Cooperative’,  
 But ever on our lips and at the weir  
 ‘The eelworks’. (32)

Heaney uses individual identification through foodwork most powerfully in the portraits of his family members – among them his aunt Mary, his father, and grandfather. Aunt Mary Heaney, who remained unmarried and lived with the family, is immortalised in “Mossbawn: Sunlight” (*North* ix-x). It was one of Mary’s routine jobs around the home to bake bread and scones (O’Driscoll 172). Baking for the family – in the heat of the sun and the “reddening stove” (“Mossbawn: Sunlight” ix), her clothes and body marked with flour, with signs of her labour – shows the love of the aunt for the family, although the repeated references to “absence” (ix) and “space” (x) may indicate that it is not necessarily expressed. No words are spoken. In the poem, love is mentioned explicitly:

And here is love  
 like a tinsmith’s scoop  
 sunk past its gleam  
 in the meal-bin. (x)

But in real life, this love is hidden, in food and in work, in providing for the family.

Heaney's father appears in several poems, and repeatedly, the poet considers his own occupational identity in comparison to that of his male relatives. In "Digging," the first poem of the first published collection (*Death of a Naturalist* 1-2), the identity of the men of three generations – grandfather, father and son – is closely linked to the work they do, farming in the case of the father and grandfather, writing in the case of young Seamus. The comparison of the different tools used by the men of the family has a pretty straightforward meaning. The digging work of the father and grandfather (particularly in the past) was done to sustain the family, sowing potatoes and cutting turf for warmth and cooking. The two foods mentioned – potatoes and milk, along with turf fire – are the quintessential traditional staples of Ireland. Heaney's connection to the rural Irish foodways shows not only through his actual involvement in these activities as a child, but also through his very specific and realistic rendering of the scenes.

### Collective and Individual Identity (2): Through Food Consumption

The act of consuming – eating, drinking or indeed tasting – is not a common food motif in Heaney's works, yet it is not entirely absent. In "To Pablo Neruda in Tamlaghtduff" (*District and Circle*), Heaney captures a quintessential experience within the food-cultural universe – a Proustian moment, when the physical taste of a food immediately brings the eater back to a time and a place through involuntary memory. By eating from a jar of crab-apple jelly that a friend or neighbour brought him, the speaker is transported to the realms of his childhood, roaming around the district, touching ("high summer's smoulder" 64), tasting ("freshets and orbs" 64), smelling ("cow-parsley and nettles" 64) and seeing (although he admits that the golden memories may be "pure hindsight" 65). Indeed, the speaker turns into an apple ("my eyes were on stalks" 64), recalling the way utter surprise is often rendered in cartoons, when eyes pop out as if on stalks. The speaker is so touched that "taste-bud/and tear-duct melt down" (65) and he

greedily devours the jelly on his bread “as if there were no tomorrow” (65). Eating the crab-apple jelly transports Heaney back to his past and to a place where he is sure to belong.

Consuming certain food and drink also signals belonging to a group or community. The identity of the eel fishermen in “Eelworks” is not only bound up in their work, but also in what they habitually consume – they drink rum with peppermint, so regularly that Heaney portrays them accordingly:

Rum-and-peppermint men too  
At the counter later on  
In her father’s pub. (29)

### Commensality and the Third Place

Commensality, the act of eating together and sharing food, is a fundamentally human trait. Only humans eat together and share food as adults, and this habit again is age-old, stemming from our prehistoric ancestors who began to hunt, cook, and then eat together (Fischler “Commensality”; Wrangham; Kerner et al.). This turned eating from a primary biological function to a primary social function (Fischler, “Commensality” 530). Eating together creates and maintains social bonds; it can be used as a sign of inclusiveness or exclusiveness.

In Heaney’s poetry, meals and eating/drinking together are depicted with a certain awareness of their social implications. In “Oysters” (*Field Work*), commensality is shown through the eating of oysters and drinking, and how it maintains the bonds of friendship:

[...] toasting friendship,  
Laying down a perfect memory  
In the cool of thatch and crockery. (3)

The first section of “Eelworks” (*Human Chain*) pivots on commensality, indeed, inclusive commensality: the courting young man is invited to eat “an eel supper” (28) with the family of the girl

he is infatuated with. Eating together (and being invited to join a group/family to eat with them) has a strongly symbolic character. It implies peace and goodwill through the offer of shared sustenance, as well as intimacy. On the flipside, the act of eating with another family for the first time may also be fraught with challenges. Heaney hints as much, when he compares himself to a hero in a fairy tale:

To win the hand of the princess  
 What tasks the youngest son  
 Had to perform! (28)

Not only might our young hero make a misstep in table etiquette, but the very food served – in this case “an eel supper” – might be an unusual dish, strange in flavour or texture, centred even on something that the young guest might not generally consider food. This alludes to what Claude Fischler calls the Omnivore’s Paradox, that we are simultaneously attracted by and cautious about new foods, as they promise a further source of nourishment, but potentially also the danger of poison (“Food” 277-278).

Commensality and the concomitant rules of table etiquette are also the focus of “Clearances: 2” (*The Haw Lantern*). The poem describes a typical visit to Heaney’s maternal grandfather’s house, the “Land of the Dead” (28), where crockery is “white and big” (28) and “unchipped” (28), and there are no crumbs. The food is “present and correct” (28) – sandwiches and “teascones” (28). The food portrayed here is prim and proper, yet lifeless – so different from the smelly, messy, hot, rising and breathing food world of Heaney’s childhood in the countryside. The only noise allowed is the whistling kettle; movement is discouraged. The child is given strict behavioural instructions:

And don't be dropping crumbs. Don't tilt your chair.  
 Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise when you stir. (28)

The “welcome” (28) and commensality is “present and correct” (28), but lacking spirit.



The social bonds around eating and drinking together play a part in the idea of the Third Place (Oldenburg and Brissett), the home away from home where people congregate and converse without any obligation, save paying for what is consumed. This type of public space has its own moniker in Ireland: the local. The pub (as in “Eelworks”), of course, is the quintessential Third Place in Ireland, embodying the local habitus (Bourdieu *Outline*) around drinking and socialising.

In “Casualty” (*Field Work*), Heaney sketches a portrait of the drinking habitus of the time, place and type of people, while condensing the craziness of the Northern Irish Troubles onto one man’s fate (see Fox and The Poetry Foundation). The drinks themselves are place-specific (though all-Irish rather than just Northern) – drinking blackcurrant cordial as a mixer with rum, and stout. The pubs are described as “warm lit-up places/the blurred mesh and murmur” (16) of “gregarious smoke ... drifting among glasses” (16) – a typical Third Place, indeed. The habitus of drinking in pubs and the allure of the Third Place is so strong that the man in question even ventures out there not only in the “showery dark” (14), but on a night under curfew after the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry. Heaney remembers being taken out fishing with the man – “I tasted freedom with him” (17). Ironically, it was the suppression of freedom, of the simple freedom to go out and have a beer, that made a man a casualty as the pub where he was drinking in defiance of the curfew was obliterated by an IRA bomb.

### Appetite and Killing to Eat

While taste is not a dominant motif in Heaney’s gastronomical imagination, the theme of appetite appears several times. Appetite is of course neither hunger nor taste. Whereas hunger is a recurring biological function, and taste influences our food choices and preferences as well as showing our cultural capital, appetite has implications of desire, and with that, of greed. Stephen Mennell argues that society works to restrain individual appetites for the

common good, as part of what Norbert Elias termed the Civilizing Process. External social and cultural restraints through explicit rules are, over time, internalised; however, this might still cause tension in the individual when personal desires counteract these internalised values. There are a few examples in Heaney's poetry where such tensions are playing out.

Transgressive appetite shines through in "Blackberry Picking" (*Death of a Naturalist*). It is a multi-sensorial poem: colourful (red, green, black, blue, purple, grey as well as glossy, dark, inked), tactile (thick, scratchy, wet, pricks, sticky, hard, furry, burning), odorous (stinking, smelling of rot), tasty (sweet, sour) and noisy (tinkling). This list of sensory impression already indicates the darker side to the picking and eating of the berries, which is underlined by the number of body parts in the poem, not just the hands that are "peppered/With thorn pricks" (8) and sticky, but flesh, blood, tongue, and eyes. The hands, or palms, are actually "sticky as Bluebeard's" (8), i.e. sticky with blood (or blood-like blackberry juice). The reference to Bluebeard, the mythical serial killer of his wives, enhances the allusion to doing something criminal or wrongful. Using words such as "lust," "hunger," "stains" and "hoarding" (8) add to this, as well as the fact that the pickers have a "cache" (8), something hidden away – but then there is the retribution of the "fungus" and "rot" (8). This indicates a loss of innocence, the playing of a part in the consequences of "lust" and "hunger" (8), of untrammelled appetite.

Growing up on a working farm, Heaney was no stranger to the realities of foodwork, which also means that fundamentally, we must kill other living beings to eat. This has been a contentious point throughout recorded history of mankind, with Pythagoras (ca. 570 – ca. 495 BC) making an early example of the refusal to participate in the killing of animals. Heaney picks up this debate in several poems. Killing to eat is a strong theme in "Oysters" (*Field Work*), where the bivalves are described as "alive and violated" (3) – "millions of them ripped and shucked and scattered" (3) – echoing the global dispersal of the Irish through emigration necessitated through famine and violence at home.

“Eelworks” (*Human Chain*) makes the need to kill in order to live the focus of its third section, with the portrait of Alfie Kirkwood in his “jerkin rank with eel oil” (29). Coming up close with someone so bound up in the work of catching and (obviously, as he smells of eel oil) also killing an animal is for the young Heaney a “first encounter with the up close/That had to be put up with” (29). In order to eat (meat), we must kill. We must get close and personal with a living being, and commit the act of taking its life, in order to feed ourselves. This “had to be put up with” (29).

### The Famine

A final, food-historical theme in Heaney’s work is the Irish Famine of 1845-49, the devastating catastrophe caused by the potato blight and exacerbated by contemporary political and economic circumstances, which resulted in a million Irish dead and a further million who emigrated, with many millions to follow in the subsequent century. Heaney engages with the Famine in two poems in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*.

The Famine is the topic of “At a Potato Digging,” which shows farm work at the time of writing as well as scenes from famine-haunted Ireland. Humans are humbled throughout. They bow to the “famine gods” (18) and mother Earth; they are likened to potatoes, to plants in general (hungry people “grubbing, like plants, in the earth” 19), to animals as they “wolfed” (19) the blighted potato or “swarm” (18) to dig out the potatoes after the mechanical digger has gone through, “like crows attacking crow-black fields” (18). Starving people have “faces chilled to a plucked bird” (19). At some point, they are said to be living in “wicker huts” (19) – similar to the potatoes who are transported and/or kept in wicker baskets. Only once, in section I, are humans shown to be humans – as for a moment they “stand/Tall” (18). The dehumanising of humans in the poem may be a comment on the importance of food security and what the lack of it does to the human spirit.

In “For the Commander of the Eliza,” Heaney sketches an incident between a small group of individuals, illuminating thereby

the ills of a skewed food system with highly uneven power distribution in the colonial economy, which collapsed entirely when the staple foodstuff was compromised. The piece is written in the perspective and the voice of a British naval commander who succeeds quite well in removing himself from the plight of his fellow humans, whom he even understands, as he says that he “hailed the crew/ In Gaelic” and does not see the need to translate “*bia*” (21), the Irish word for food. He succeeds therein through dehumanising the men he encounters, and by referring back to official policy and language: “the Westport Sector” (21), “good Whitehall” (21) “no mandate” (21), and repeating the policy line about the “lavish ... zeal and activity” (22) of the Coast Guard. Also, the Famine is called “the shortage” (21) in officialese understatement. However, both the commander and his own crew were affected by the encounter after all, as the memory of the starving men haunts them and needs to be “exorcised” (22) – but not through any heathen ritual, rather through the very civilised ritual of a report to the Inspector General.

The officialese language, which can be grating in everyday life as it sets policy and bureaucracy above individual human concerns, serves to heighten the cruelty of the scene. It illustrates in miniature the stance and behaviour of the British Empire during the Irish Famine, which did little to relieve the suffering, and arguably made it worse. In its recourse to bureaucratic procedures and party line, the incident also serves as an example of what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil.” The commander, refusing humanitarian assistance despite himself and his men being “always kept ... right in flour and beef” (21), presumably had or at least showed no personal animosity or pathological impulse towards the starving men, yet accepted their suffering as normal as they fell outside the system or worldview. He even mentions that there is assistance available – “relief was then available in Westport” (21) – but since there were official channels, he and his crew had “no mandate” (21) to help, even though “these poor brutes clearly would never make it” (21).

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to approach Heaney's poetry through a culinary lens, informed by the research and insights in the field of Food Studies. This gastrocritical reading of a selection of Heaney's poetry from his first to his last published collection has uncovered a rich seam of gastronomical topics, and sensitivity to such topics by the poet, throughout the span of his life and work. Heaney not only repeatedly turns to food imagery, but also chooses food and foodways as a focus and active presence in his work throughout his career (albeit more often in his earlier, more concrete phase), thereby arguably adding to the credibility of food as a subject matter to be taken seriously.

Heaney's vivid, meticulous rendering of food-related scenes, from farming and fishing to tea-time and suppers, may be of interest to scholars as a quasi-ethnographical and historical source on (Northern) Irish food and foodways since the 1960s (see Ferguson for the links between ethnography and literature). The illustrative power of the poet's words further adds depth to our understanding of the meaning and context of food and foodways, from the heart-warming stories of shared meals and joint foodwork to the heart-breaking images of people starving and humiliated. Heaney's food-related verses tell of love, regret, fear, ecstasy, greed and pride, of the power to create and to destroy, of human impotence in the face of nature and an uncertain future, of the solace of memories and community. They tell of the struggle to be human. All this is told through food, but not primarily through symbolism and rhetoric. Food and foodways, as Food Studies scholars have shown, intrinsically embody the human condition, and, as this gastrocritical reading of his work has demonstrated, Heaney harnesses their multiple layers of meaning to powerful effect.

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